

(U) Ask Zelda: Decibels Driving Me Batty

FROM: 'Zelda,' Dispenser of Advice for SIGINTers on Workplace Issues

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(U) Editor's note: Today Zelda tackles the tricky problem of dealing with vociferous office mates. Her column is unclassified in its entirety.



Dear Readers,

Is too much sound causing you fury? I have received several inquiries for advice about noise issues: working in close quarters with a loud talker, not being able to concentrate, overhearing embarrassing conversations, and the like. Here's what I have to say (quietly!) about the subject.

Everyone knows it can get pretty noisy in the office, especially if you work on a watch floor, in an organization with low partitions or the open-space architecture, or if you have a customer-oriented mission and deal with frequent phone calls or walk-ins. Here are some tips for peaceful co-existence.

Policing Yourself

- When conversing with a co-worker, act as if you're telling her something in confidence. Walk over to her desk or scootch your chair close to hers, and speak in subdued tones (as opposed to yelling across the room or over your cubicle).
- *Sit down* when carrying on a conversation -- sometimes that's enough to prevent your voice from carrying over the partition. You may even want to organize your workstation so that you're facing a wall when you're on the phone, to dampen the sound.
- For social discussions -- rehashing the football game, eating lunch with friends -- take that outside the office, if possible. The cafeteria or even the hallway provides a good place to have non-work-related chats without bothering office mates who are trying to concentrate.
- Be aware of your voice level on the phone -- especially when talking to someone on a cell phone (voices tend to rise due to poor signal quality) or to your gastroenterologist (*no one* wants to hear those details -- especially while they're eating lunch!).
- Above all, if you're holding a potentially sensitive discussion (such as a counseling session) with someone, hold it in a private office with the door closed or check to make sure no one else is around before you begin.

Policing Others

As people get excited or enthusiastic about a subject, the volume frequently increases. Some have voices that can be heard far and wide, even when they are speaking softly. They don't mean to be disruptive, so please be kind when approaching them.

- Try to ignore it for the short term. Keep a pair of ear plugs or head phones handy to slip on when the decibels rise. Often the conversation will be over quickly and you can resume your concentration.
- If the disruption continues, walk over to the person or group and **nicely** say something like, "You probably don't realize it but your voices carry." Often that's enough for them to sheepishly take it down a notch, apologize, and/or take the discussion elsewhere. If they apologize, be gracious. After all, you could be the next offender.
- If you are part of a discussion and notice it's getting loud, try lowering your voice significantly. We often unconsciously mimic the people we're interacting with, and this trick might encourage others in the conversation to lower theirs, as well. Alternatively, you could simply point out the rising noise level to the group and suggest either moving the discussion or toning it down.
- If workplace noise is a recurring problem that you have tried unsuccessfully to fix, enlist your supervisor's help. Perhaps your organization could set some rules for dealing with the noise, such as designating a private area for conversations of three or more people.
- If everyone in your organization has a good attitude about it, you could have a codeword or signal for when someone accidentally turns up the volume. A good-natured reminder to "use your indoor voice" or a silly paper "**cone of silence**" placed on someone's desk can get the message across in a fun way.
- When you hear the beginning of a sensitive conversation, let the speakers know immediately before it gets embarrassing for both you and them. You could clear your throat or shuffle some papers if they don't realize you're on the other side of the partition.
- Share your spaces with someone who has a booming voice? Bring up the subject in a respectful way. Let him know its affect on you: "I'm finding it hard to concentrate because your voice is very distinctive, and even though you're not intentionally talking loud, I hear everything you say." Ask him to help you come up with a solution to your mutual problem.

Use humor, tolerance, and tact, but take action before your frustration level reaches the boiling point and you blow your top like an annoyingly shrill teakettle.

Zelda
